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New biomedical practices and discourses: Focus on surrogacy

Abstract: This study, set in a discourse-analytical and constructionist framework, explores the impact of biomedical advances on language and discourse. The main focus is on surrogacy and on the websites of ten organizations promoting it, with headquarters in various countries where this practice is legal. The discursive representation of the different forms of surrogacy and related Assisted Reproductive Technologies is discussed, focusing in particular on the communicative strategies enacted to deal with the most sensitive and controversial aspects. The analysis provides evidence of an approach that represents surrogacy, the actors and the moral issues involved in absolutely positive terms, and at the same time disregards the most problematic and controversial aspects, making recourse to some recurrent discursive frames. A further aspect investigated is the representation and denomination of the various actors involved, in a context where the spread of new reproductive technologies has introduced the possibility of significantly altering the natural mechanisms presiding over the inception of human life, and has thus triggered a process of lexical innovation and adaptation of the basic vocabulary associated with reproduction and kinship roles.

Keywords: surrogacy, bioethics, kinship role vocabulary, discursive frames, assisted reproductive technologies

1 Introduction

Since its origins in the 1980s,[1] surrogacy, i.e. the process by which a woman agrees to give birth to a child on behalf of commissioning parents, has been highly controversial in many countries, for a number of reasons. Like many

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1 Although the first surrogacy agreements date back to the late 1970s, the first known case of surrogacy with IVF was recorded in 1985.

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other Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs), it is a source of serious bioethical concern and raises various critical issues, as is confirmed by the restrictions and bans to which it is subject in many countries. Surrogacy is often seen as baby trading, an idea made worse by suspicions that surrogate mothers are exploited by commissioning parents. It is also often pointed out that, in particular in gestational surrogacy where the surrogate has no biological link with the baby,[2] it may lead to complex genetic/biological situations in terms of maternity/paternity recognition which cannot be clarified even through DNA testing (as in the famous *Jaycee v. Supreme Court of Orange County* 1996).[3] A further objection regards the problematic legal position of children born from surrogacy and the impossibility for some of them to learn about their real genetic/biological origins, in breach of Art. 8 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNO 1990 [1989]) which provides for every child's right to know his/her identity.

The introduction of surrogacy is part of the dramatic advances in the biomedical domains that have had an unprecedented impact on some fundamental facts of life – reproduction, health, genetic therapies, organ transplant, end of life, etc. – and have revolutionized our conceptualisation of the body as a non-sectionable organism, that is, as a cohesive whole with whose functioning it is impossible to interfere beyond a certain limit, and strictly belonging to the single individual in all of its parts, and therefore non-shareable to any degree. This has brought about profound cultural and axiological changes, changing communities' categorization of some basic aspects of human life and often altering their ethical convictions. Discourses on surrogacy are hardly ever neutral, necessarily involving tensions between traditional views of family and reproduction and their linguistic framing on the one hand, and the recently introduced categories and linguistic resources describing the new practices and the physical and social conditions resulting from them, on the other hand.

For all these reasons, surrogacy is an object of heated debate, also on account of the commercial character of the organizations offering it, mostly centres specialised in assisting prospective parents and in managing the whole surrogacy cycle. These same organisations support prospective parents who

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2 In gestational surrogacy the surrogate mother has no biological link with the baby, as the embryo is created using either the eggs and sperm of the commissioning parents, or a donated egg fertilised with the sperm of the commissioning father, or eggs and sperm from donors. This is in contrast with the other main form of surrogacy, traditional surrogacy, in which the surrogate mother lends her own ovum and is artificially inseminated with the sperm of the intended father.
3 The judgement can be found at http://law.justia.com/cases/california/court-of-appeal/4th/42/718.html (accessed 10/02/2017). Cf. also Markens (2007), 1-2.

decide to go abroad for surrogacy because in their country it is totally or partially illegal, or too expensive. The global industry of reproductive tourism is an important phenomenon today, with many people travelling to contries like Cambodia, Ukraine, Greece, Thailand, Mexico and India to seek infertility treatment. In actual fact, in recent times some of these countries have passed regulations limiting access to surrogacy for foreigners (e.g. India; Thailand; Tabasco - Mexico).

This study examines the discursive representations of surrogacy and related practices on surrogacy organizations' websites, and aims at identifying the discursive strategies enacted to deal with the most sensitive and ethically and legally controversial aspects of this practice.

After the broad overview of issues surrounding surrogacy already presented in this section (§1) and the review of the literature presented in §2, I will go on to outline my data and methodology (§3). I will then proceed to the actual analysis, and look first at the recurrent discursive frames and metaphors deployed on the websites (§4.1), also discussing the rhetorical strategies used by surrogacy organizations to illustrate their value proposition (§4.2) and the related notion of Ethical Surrogacy (§4.3). Website sections specifically addressed to prospective surrogates will also be considered (§4.4). The discussion of the representation of actors that closes the analysis (§4.5) will also show that the spread of new reproductive technologies has triggered a process of lexical innovation and adaptation of the basic vocabulary associated with reproduction and kinship roles. Conclusions will follow (§5), with some general considerations on the impact of biomedical advances on language and discourse.

2 Literature review

The literature on surrogacy, mainly undertaken in sociology, anthropology and gender studies, is by now ample and tends to be multidisciplinary. A first group of studies, published in the 1990s, focus on ethical and moral aspects of the practice (e.g. Andrews 1989; Ragoné 1994), and its legal implications (e.g. Field 1990; Brugger 2012; Choudury 2016). Surrogacy has also been approached from a feminist point of view, with contrasting positions. Especially in the early stages, studies were highly critical of surrogacy as a form of medicalization and commodification of the female body (Dworkin 1983; Corea 1985; Raymond 1993; Rothman 2000), with charges of exploitation of poor women from countries of the South of the world (e.g Davis 1993; Rothman 2000). Other studies took an opposite view, representing surrogates as women in full control of themselves,

using their bodies to challenge the traditional family model (Ragoné 1994; Roberts 1998; Berend 2010).[4] A recent study (Jacobson 2016) argues that surrogacy is 'real' work, indeed the extreme of female-oriented occupations, and is part of the steady expansion of the market into family life still under way (Jacobson 2016: 177-178).

Other researchers have shifted their attention to the impact of surrogacy on the cultural meanings associated with maternity, parenthood and kinship (Thompson 2005; Markens 2007) with studies taking an ethnographic approach and providing indications on how surrogacy is represented in women's narratives.

In an in-depth ethnography of surrogacy arrangements in Israel, Teman (2010) found that surrogates tended to describe their bodies as fragmented, referring to their womb as "an incubator" or "an oven" ("their bun, my oven": Teman 2010: 35), an "unnatural" machine part that hosts the intended parents' "natural" embryo. This shows that surrogates tend to create a map of their bodies where areas contributing to their "personal maternal identity" are separate from those that are set aside for the contracting couple to inhabit (Teman 2010: 46).

Another ethnographic study on surrogacy by Pande (2011), carried out in India, found that substitute mothers often talk about their surrogate pregnancy using the *gift* metaphor, a gift not destined for intended parents, but for the surrogate's own family which, thanks to surrogacy, can be helped economically. Interpreting surrogacy as a "God's gift to the needy but not greedy mothers" enables women to emphasise their selfless motives, although they take substitute motherhood for money (cf. Pande 2011: 619). Intended mothers from Western countries often conceptualise hiring a poor woman from the South of the world as a form of international aid, and represent their relationship with the surrogate mother as an altruistic act which, thanks to the surrogacy fee paid, will help the substitute mother and her family change their lives for the better. Another aspect emphasised is the description of the relationship between the surrogate mother and the commissioning mother as a "sisterly tie", a definition which obscures its contractual character in spite of the subjection of the former to the latter due to race and class.

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4 In relatively recent times European mainstream feminist groups took a negative stance towards surrogacy with an extensive campaign in Italy and France which culminated in the *Assises pour l'Abolition Universelle de la Maternité de Substitution* (02/02/2016), and the publication of a *Charte pour l'abolition universelle de la maternité de substitution* http://abolition-gpa.org/charte/ accessed 31.12.2018.

Some further hints about the representation of surrogacy and associated discourse can be gleaned from a comprehensive study of surrogacy in the US by Markens (2007). In one of the chapters she examines a corpus of editorials dealing with surrogacy published from 1980 to 2002 in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and identifies two main ideological stances toward the problem, one considering surrogacy as "commodified reproduction", and the other seeing it as a form of "reproduction freedom", each stance being connected respectively to a different way of representing the issue: the surrogacy as "commodified reproduction" stance frames surrogacy as "baby selling", and the "reproduction freedom" stance represents it as a way to alleviate the "plight of the infertile couple". Markens advocates the legalization of the practice aimed at making it subject to legal regulation (cf. Markens 2007, 80).

Although to my knowledge, apart from Garzone (2017), no linguistic or discourse analytical studies of surrogacy websites have been published so far, two studies of how fertility clinics' websites addressed to gay men advertise their services can be of some interest for the present work. Through content analysis Hawkins (2012) shows that on those websites the emotional content largely prevails over the informational content. Riggs and Due (2017) uses thematic analysis to show that the pages addressed to gay men are informed by a typically "neoliberal" logic centred on free choice and desire satisfaction, with two recurring themes: the desire for genetic relatedness and the universality of the desire for a child as a marker of family.

3 Data and method

3.1 Data

The starting point is the analysis of the websites of ten surrogacy organizations, located in various countries (the US, Mexico, Canada, Georgia, Ukraine and Greece), and looks in particular at language-based communication, although attention is marginally given to the visual components of the websites when they are functional to the meaning-making process in synergy with text (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 2006).

Texts included in the corpus comprise about 100,000 tokens (98,315), with a Standardized Type Token Ratio of 39.37. Among the surrogacy organizations selected, some (Center for Surrogate Parenting [CSP], Extraordinary Conceptions [EXC], Sensible Surrogacy [SS], Surrogacy beyond Borders [SBB], Physician's Surrogacy [PHS]) are based in the US, mainly in California, but – with a view to reducing prices – also operate abroad in countries where surrogacy is legal;

one (CARE Surrogacy Center Mexico [CMEX]) is based in Mexico, and has facilities also in the US and in Georgia; four are part of the New Life global network, consisting of independent surrogacy centres located in different countries (New Life Georgia [NLGEO], New Life Mexico [NLMEX], New Life Greece [NLGR], New Life Ukraine [NLUK]). Some of these organizations have their own clinics and/or donation centres; others function as agencies operating through affiliated clinics and partners.

In light of the fact that a preliminary examination of the materials did not indicate an appreciable difference in discursive approach among the different websites due to their peeculiarities or different geographical location, in this study the corpus is dealt with as a unitary whole, leaving a more refined analysis of these aspects for further research taking a comparative or intercultural perspective.

3.2 Method

The analytical approach adopted in this study is essentially discourse analytical (cf. e.g. Brown and Yule 1983; Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton 2001) and rests on a view of discourse as socially-situated "language-in-action" (Blommaert 2005: 2), which not only reflects reality, but also contributes to categorizing and constructing it, and to shaping associated social practices. On account of its dynamic character, discourse evolves in time in parallel to social changes, as it reflects them and at the same time contributes to triggering and/or reinforcing them (cf. Fairclough 1992). This study explores changes in language ensuing from developments in the biomedical sciences and their social impact, with a view to describing the new discourses they originate. In this respect, Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 2014 [1989]; Wodak and Meyer 2001) is especially useful for the purpose of detecting the inevitable ideological implications in discourses dealing with such fundamental, intimate and still unstable issues, based on the assumption that language is never neutral and even the most basic linguistic choices carry with them an element of bias or slant, if not of outright ideology (Kress and Hodge 1979; van Dijk 1998; Garzone and Sarangi 2007; Fairclough 2014 [1989]).

Within this general picture, an important notion relied on in this study is that of *discursive frame*. Frames, to which Goffman (1974: 21) also refers as "schemata of interpretation", are cognitive perceptual structures that either subconsciously or strategically influence participants on how to "hear or how to say" something (Bartel 2010: 311); in other words, they condition the way people conceptualize reality. In this study *discursive frames* are intended as

frames associated with specific discourses and the linguistic resources realizing them, which are more or less deliberately deployed for the purpose of orienting recipients' understanding of a particular topic. As defined by Entman (1993: 52),

> "to frame is to *elect some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation* for the items described" (italics in the original).

Because of their function as "definitions of situations" (Goffman 1974: 10), in the research presented here the identification of discursive frames is functional to understanding the strategies through which the processes involved in new reproduction technologies and their consequences are made sense of and defined on surrogacy websites.

Since, quite interestingly, some of the discursive frames that are recurrent in the corpus are based on metaphors, account will also be taken of the literature on metaphor, and in particular of recent studies that go beyond the Cognitive Metaphor Theory *à la* Lakoff and Johnson (1980), also considering more creative uses of this trope, for instance uses aimed at highlighting certain aspects of the objects or experiences being represented (cf. Semino 2008). Recent studies have underlined the role of metaphors in framing as a process to reflect and activate different ways of understanding and reasoning about things (Semino et al. 2018).

Although quantitative data are only occasionally mentioned in the text, in the research process discourse analytical tools were integrated with corpus linguistics procedures, using the Wordsmith Tools 6.0 suite of software programmes (Scott 2012), to identify salient aspects of the texts investigated, and at the same time find confirmation to hypotheses made on the basis of qualitative analysis, in order to avoid the subjectivity and arbitrariness of which the qualitative approach of CDA has been accused (cf. Hardt-Mautner 1995; Garzone and Santulli 2004).

4 Analysis: Discourses on surrogacy websites

ARTs websites are essential for the promotion of the activities of organizations specialised in assisting surrogacy because in many cases they are the only point of contact with potential clients, on account of the potentially illegal or, at least, controversial status of the services offered by such organisations.

The structures of the websites analysed are very similar. They all feature a home page where the visual component is characterised by a prevalence

of *pathos* (cf. Garzone 2017), as it mostly consists of photos of happy families, traditional and non-traditional, or of single parents happily cuddling a baby or a child as well as of pictures of new-born babies, with big eyes, chubby cheeks, and tiny hands and feet. These images are not only alluring for people longing for parenthood, but may induce positive feelings in anyone as a result of the so-called Baby Schema (*Kindchenschema*) effect first described by Konrad Lorenz in 1943. This effect has been confirmed by subsequent scientific research, which has proved that babies' infantile features induce cuteness perception, affective orientation and caretaking behaviour in adults. In this case, the images of cute babies are used as an object of agreement (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969[1958]: 65-67), i.e. a premise – here visual – that is to serve as foundation for argumentation, creating a favourable disposition even in surrogacy detractors, and highlighting the merits of a practice that has the ultimate result of creating new life.

4.1 Recurrent frames

This section focuses on texts published on the websites of the surrogacy centres under discussion and aims at identifying the linguistic strategies and discursive frames characterising them.

The headlines and sub-heads appearing on the landing pages of most surrogacy centres' websites are obviously aimed at grabbing visitors' attention. Borrowing a notion from marketing management, it can be said that they put forth the Centre's *value proposition*, i.e. "a promise about the experience customers can expect from the company marketing offer and their relationship with the supplier"[5] (Kotler and Keller 2015: 153). Thus, some of the headlines articulate the essence of the value that the Centre provides to the customer, for instance: "A child is an uncut diamond" (incidentally an aphorism by Austin O'Malley) (NLUK); "A complete family is within the reach of every loving couple" (SS). Other headlines focus on the organisation (using exclusive *we*) and on the services it can offer: "We help build & grow families" (EXC); "We help you to make miracles happen" (NLGR).

These headlines are clearly promotional, but shun a hard-sell approach (e.g. a call-to-action), avoiding the display of commercial purposes. They introduce some of the themes that recur on the websites (the Centres as helpers, the

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5 Originally devised for the marketing and sale of goods and services, the notion of value proposition is today applied also to non-commercial services, for instance to geriatric healthcare (Powers 2017).

availability of options hitherto considered materially impossible, etc.), anticipate some of the recurrent frames of Surrogacy Centres' communication and are in many cases metaphorical. Metaphorical frames are especially effective in reinforcing certain ways of making sense of surrogacy arrangements and procedures and their consequences, as the choice of the source domain highlights some aspects of the target domain and, more importantly in the case at hand, hides others (Semino et al. 2018).

A case in point is the frame based on the *journey* metaphor, which is recurrent in website headlines: "A complex journey, a simple path" (SBB); "Join us for guaranteed affordable and smooth journey to your parenthood" (NLGEO); "Rewarding journeys with CARE Surrogacy Mexico" (CMEX). The metaphor underlying these headliness is ACHIEVING PARENTHOOD IS A JOURNEY,[6] which is used to describe the sequence of the steps intended parents have to accomplish, entailing a spatialization of the actions involved and subsuming the primary metaphor PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS (cf. Semino 2008: 7). Basically, the same metaphor also recurs as SURROGACY IS A JOURNEY, that is, reformulated from the viewpoint of the surrogate mother, referring to the process of hormonal preparation, insemination procedures and pregnancy. Recourse to these two parallel metaphorical mappings is quite recurrent also in the body texts as the word *journey* appears 89 times and in all cases carries this metaphorical meaning, As an examination of the concordance lines for *journey* shows, the *journey* metaphor is used consistently, with the word *journey* qualified by various premodifiers, in the form of epithets (*emotional, amazing, complex, important, proactive, wonderful, adoring* [*sic*], *remarkable, special*) and classifiers (*surrogacy journey, legal journey, family-building journey, fertility journey, CARE journey*), and often also with post-modification, for instance in the cluster *journey to/towards parenthood/parenting* (11 occurrences) appearing at least once in each of the files. In a few cases metaphorical meaning is conveyed by a quasi-synonym, *path* (occurring 5 times). Framing surrogacy through the journey metaphor makes it possible to refrain from dealing directly with the material (and questionable) aspects of the practice, contributing to presenting the services promoted in terms that are acceptable to everyone.

Another advantage of the SURROGACY AS A JOURNEY metaphor is that it allows organizations to present themselves as travel companions or – more menially – as travel agents, assisting and facilitating intended parents. This connects the interpretative repertoire (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 146-148) generated within this metaphorical frame with the *surrogacy centre as assistant and*

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6 As is customary in the relevant literature, conceptualizations of metaphors are indicated in small capitals, while for frames small italics are used.

friend frame (see below), for the obvious purpose of avoiding representing surrogacy centres as mere service providers or, worse, as providers of procedures characterised by an uncertain legal and/or moral status.

Another recurrent metaphorical frame is based on the idea of *dream*, with the lemma *dream** recurring 69 times (0.7%) in the corpus, of which only 3 occurrences are verb forms (*dreamed, dreaming*), all others being nouns. The basic metaphor is PARENTHOOD IS A DREAM, from which the secondary metaphor SURROGACY IS THE REALIZATION OF A DREAM is derived. It is meanigful that this metaphor, present in all the files, appears in recurrent linguistic patterns. In 20 cases *dream* is qualified by a post-modifier introduced by *of: the dream of having our own little family, of being parents, of becoming parents, of having a child, of building a family, of parenting, of parenthood*. After the bare noun, or the post-modification, there frequently appear the most obvious collocations for *dream*, i.e. *come(s) true* (16 times) or *become a reality* (2 occurrences), e.g.

(1)   Extraordinary Conceptions is looking for outstanding women who want to help *make dreams come true* (EXC).[7]

But more often the noun *dream* is the object of a verb meaning *to bring to realization, to attain*, e.g.:

(2)   Center for Surrogate Parenting, Inc. (CSP) is a surrogacy agency dedicated to helping individuals and couples *achieve their dream* of becoming parents, regardless of sexual orientation (CSP).

In many of these cases the main verb is preceded by *help*, as in the examples above, activating again the *surrogacy organization as helper* frame.

There is a third recurrent metaphorical frame in the corpus: SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD IS A GIFT or EGG DONATION IS A GIFT. It is often associated with the 'dream' image, but it is not so ubiquitous, recurring 31 times and only on seven of the websites, as in the following examples:

(3)   Each of our surrogates are [*sic*] ready to create a distinctive relationship and *give you the ultimate gift of family* (CMEX).

While the implications of the use of this metaphor will be dealt with in more detail in Section 3.3 below, in light of the observations made so far it can be stated that on these website the representational use of metaphors prevails,

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7 In all examples, emphasis is added unless otherwise indicated.

aimed at foregrounding certain aspects of the objects represented to the detriment of others, in the specific case diverting recipients' attention away from the more material and controversial aspects of surrogacy and intended parenthood. This is what Semino (2008: 33) defines as an "ideological" use of metaphor.

4.2 Other discursive frames: values in defence of surrogacy

The metaphors described in section §4.1 pave the way to a whole range of discursive options in the representation of surrogacy centres' activities and role, first and foremost that of the *helper* already hinted at above. This emerges immediately in the *About* texts published by these organizations on their home pages to introduce themselves, where they are described in terms of *mission* and *commitment*, e.g.:

(4)   Infertility is a challenge that faces fifteen million American couples at some point in their lives. Turning that quandary statistic around is *our mission* (CMEX)

(5)   *Our mission* is to help couples create loving families. (SS)

Here surrogacy centres are depicted as guided by non-business-like motives, such as fighting infertility and helping people start families.

   In some cases the text introducing the organization is more complex and elaborate, as in the following example:

(6)   *Where Surrogate Moms & Parents Build Families*
      [...] The Center for Surrogate Parenting, Inc. (CSP), is solely focused on surrogacy. We connect future parents with a surrogate (gestational carrier), and we also work with potential surrogate mothers. We believe that those who are willing to take on the responsibility of becoming a parent deserve that opportunity.
      CSP is a well-known surrogacy agency and we have helped parents from all over the world. [...] We take pride in helping you find the ideal surrogate match based on your needs and desires. Together, we will work with you to achieve your dream of becoming a parent. (CSP).

In this excerpt the evident objective is to construct an image of the surrogacy centre as actively assisting intended parents in the process of creating a family, avoiding all reference to the commercial character of the operation and to the

sensitive physical, psychological and legal issues involved in the practice. This is part of the recurrent *surrogacy organization as helper* frame, confirmed by the high frequency of *help** (267 hits, 0.26%) and *assist** (83, 0.09%), in addition to 105 (0.11%) occurrences of *work* with*' in contexts where it means *collaborate*.

Another discursive frame that appears in example (6) regards the notion of the universal right to parenthood, a right which in actual fact is far from being universally and unconditionally acknowledged. The right to reproduction is recognised as a human right internationally and in many legislations, but mainly as a negative right, i.e. the right not to be prevented from procreating, while as a positive right, i.e. as the right to be supported in procreating, it is rather controversial, being recognised to different degrees only in some legislations. But in surrogacy discourse the positive right to parenthood is taken as a sort of unquestioned premise, generating a relevant discursive frame which not only permeates the texts, but is also stated openly in various contexts and as part of the *values* affirmatively upheld:

(7)   At our CARE Surrogacy Center, *we strongly believe that everyone deserves the opportunity to become a parent*, including those who are heterosexual, single, gay, or lesbian. (CMEX)

(8)   CSP was established because *we strongly believe that couples who are ready and willing to take on the responsibility of parenthood deserve that opportunity*. (CSP)

Here the right to have children is affirmed categorically in statements that, quite interestingly, are introduced by the verb *believe*, also reinforced by an adverb (*strongly, wholeheartedly*), contributing to the construction of the image of an organization strongly caring for values and acting upon them.

Obviously all the values affirmed on these websites are relied on to praise the advantages of surrogacy and implicitly refute the arguments of detractors, and the objections that have led many countries to put a legal ban on the practice.

4.3 Ethical surrogacy

Among the discursive strategies contributing to the defence of surrogacy, the argument distinguishing between ethical and non-ethical surrogacy is especially worthy of attention:

(9)   At Sensible Surrogacy *we wholeheartedly believe in Ethical Surrogacy*, which provides the planned parents with the opportunity to alter the surrogate's life. (SS)

The value affirmed in this example is *Ethical Surrogacy*, i.e. a form of surrogacy that guarantees an equitable treatment to the surrogate and her wellbeing, as prescribed in the *Ethical Guidelines for Surrogate Mothers* published on the SS website (<http://www.sensiblesurrogacy.com/surrogate-mother/>).

Of course, the fact of presenting the form of surrogacy offered by the organization as *ethical* implies that within the general notion of *surrogacy* there are also non-ethical forms, as is confirmed by the open stigmatisation of surrogacy as practised by other organizations:

(10)   We've read the reports of *unscrupulous profiteers who exploit surrogate mothers*. Such practices are *a threat* to women and to our practice, which is why we are committed to the Ethical Treatment of our surrogates and donors. (SS)

The statement in example (10) is one of the only two instances in the corpus where the potential problematic character of some aspects of surrogate motherhood is openly recognised (although they are attributed to other organisations); the other case regards the charge that some celebrities have made recourse to surrogacy only to avoid the loss of physical shape caused by pregnancy:

(11)   Surrogacy is not something people want to do all the time. They don't do surrogacy *for fun or to retain figure like those celebrities do*. (PHS)

Here, the discursive strategy deployed is essentially based on the rhetorical device called *dissociation*. i.e. an argumentative technique that serves to resolve the contradictions inherent in a notion originally considered a unity by distinguishing various aspects within that notion in order to eleminate the internal contradiction (van Rees 2009; cf. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969[1958]: 411ff.): the notion of surrogate motherhood, normally considered by the audience a unitary concept, is split up into two different notions, one of which comprises those aspects of the original notion that are presented as not only admissible, but indeed positive, while the other notion includes the aspects that are considered unethical, and are therefore stigmatized. Thus, in spite of the illegal status of the practice in many legal systems, what is questioned is not its ultimately ethical nature, but only the way it is practised in some cases. This kind of reasoning is aimed at refuting, more or less explicitly, the accusation

that surrogacy is a form of exploitation by well-off intended parents (often male gay couples), mosty from Western countries, of poor women from the South of the world, and rebutting the idea that the rights and needs of surrogates are trampled.

But other serious ethical questions involved in the practice itself are ignored, and it is even suggested that the choice of *ethical surrogacy* may be an act of solidarity towards the surrogate mother, contributing to improving her life and that of the egg donor:

(12)　Parents often find that working with Sensible Surrogacy gives them the satisfaction of knowing that they have made an ethical choice and *are able to bring a positive change* in the lives of their Egg Donor and their Surrogate. (SS).

This theme of substitute motherhood as an opportunity for poor women to help their families economically, which already emerged in Pande (2011) (see §2 above), recurs on most websites, with an emphasis laid on the altruistic and compassionate aspects of the practice:

(13)　Each of our surrogates are [*sic*] ready to create a distinctive relationship and give you the ultimate gift of family.
　　　These exceptional and unselfish women [...] have endured pleasurable, uncomplicated pregnancies and this arrangement allows for them to stay home with their children and ultimately contribute financially to their own family (CMEX).

Quite remarkably, this short passage reverses some of the recurrent arguments against surrogacy: it translates this practice, often perceived as an ultimate form of exploitation by intended parents, into a form of support for the surrogate's family and – quite unrealistically – an opportunity for her to have a pleasant and unproblematic physical experience.

4.4　Messages addressed to prospective surrogates and donors

Website sections addressed to prospective surrogates and donors, often located in the inner layers of the hypertext, tend to feature two main framings of the surrogacy or donation experience: one centred on the joy of altruistic generosity and the emotionally rewarding quality of these practices; the other dealing

explicitly with material aspects, including eligibility requisites, terms and conditions, and pay.

The first frame is usually realized by means of very positive lexicon (*happy, joy, rewarding, respect, friendship*, etc.), insisting on altruism and dealing with surrogacy / egg donation as a gift, and help in the achievement of a dream. An example of this discursive orientation can be seen in the following example:

(14) The surrogacy process is a *happy, joyful* and *rewarding* experience that is built on *mutual respect, friendship* and *teamwork*. We are excited that you are considering becoming a Surrogate and *helping to make dreams come true* for Future Parents. (EXC)

In a limited number of cases, surrogates' altruism is re-interpreted as a form of power they have on intended parents, a theme that recurs in the feminist tradition of studies on surrogacy (e.g. Roberts 1998). This is made explicit in the excerpt below:

(15) Congratulations!
     If you are considering becoming a surrogate, *you already understand the power you have to change lives*. (PHS).

The other discursive frame regards the material conditions of surrogacy – selection of candidates, compensation, medical procedures, often in sharp contrast with the value-oriented tone of the other parts of the websites. The requisites to be met to qualify as surrogates or egg donors are usually expressed in terms that are not different from those found in the genre of the job advertisement in the move that has been classified as *Specifying desired qualifications skills and experience / ideal candidate's personality (the profile)* or *outlining the profile* (Garzone 2018):

(16) **Surrogate Criteria**
     – 21 to 39 years old
     – No prior complications during pregnancy or delivery
     – Healthy lifestyle
     – No criminal history
     – Reliable transportation (PHS)

The sensitive topic of remuneration tends to be tackled more openly than in overviews addressed to parents, with a preference for the word *compensation*:

(17)   COMPENSATION
       The gift you bring to people is so precious that *it is very rough to talk about*
       any compensation. The fee paid to you as an egg donor is for your time,
       efforts and commitment that bring happiness to people. (CMEX)˙

Here the nature of the service rendered, presented as help for unhappy cou-
ples, is in sharp contrast with the commercial character of the surrogacy
arrangement.

    Another theme often found in the areas of the websites addressed to pro-
spective surrogates and egg donors is the technical description of procedures
performed in egg donation and in the fertilization process leading to surrogate
pregnancy, using technical language sometimes integrated with popularizing
glosses. But in no case is mention made of the "time, inconvenience and
discomfort" that according to the Ethics Committee of the American Society for
Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) "is associated with screening, ovarian stimula-
tion and oocyte retrieval", in addition to psychological consequences and a
possible increase in the risk of future infertility especially for younger donors
(ASRM 2007: 305). Similarly, there is no hint at how demanding surrogate
motherhood is in existential terms. Mention is neither made of the control
often exerted on the surrogate by commissioning parents nor of the surrogate's
logistics during pregnancy. In two cases it is specified that the surrogate is
transferred for the whole gestation period to *ad hoc* housing facilities, where
she will receive all the necessary care, but the implication is that she will be
subject to constant control:

(18)   Once pregnancy is confirmed, the surrogate is moved into a personal
       apartment under the 24/7 care of a dedicated caregivers, with available
       medical care provided by a local obstetric hospital. (SS)

Despite the idyllic tones of the description, it is obvious that in this situation the
surrogate accepts to be subject to constant observation. In only one case this
aspect is openly acknowledged, quite significantly in a passage addressed to the
commissioning mother:

(19)   You will become overly protective of your child and want your surrogate
       mother to report what she is eating, how much rest she is getting, etc. If
       you have the need to control, criticize your surrogate mother's eating
       habits, experience feelings of jealousy that she is pregnant, etc., call
       your counselor. (CSP)

This excerpt gives us a glimpse of the emotional co-ordinates of a situation in which the surrogate mother does not only face an arduous physical test, but is also in a position of subservience to commissioning parents, and sometimes even in a condition of confinement.

5 Representation of actors

An examination of the linguistic profiles of the main actors involved in surrogacy is essential for an in-depth discussion of its representation and of the discursive frames relied on on the websites examined. It may shed light on how discourse adapts to represent the new practices and their social consequences, and contributes to constructing them linguistically through definition and categorization.

Aspiring parents, being the potential clients for the services offered by surrogacy centres, qualify as the main actors, with the lemma 'parents' occurring 714 times (0.73%). When it is not accompanied by premodification, its most frequent collocation is with *to become* – *become / becoming a parent / parents* (51 occurrences) – which brings to the fore the idea of the transformation of the ontological status of prospective parents after the birth of a child.

But more often the lemma *parent/s* is accompanied by a pre-modifier, e.g. *intended parents* (361 hits) or *future parents* (58 hits) or, less frequently, *planned parents* (12), '*legal parents* (11), or even more rarely *commissioning parents* (6), probably on account of its explicitness.

This shows that the introduction of new biomedical technologies and procedures, giving rise to unprecedented situations, entails a lexical re-organization of the conceptual area of kinship and reproduction. Up to a few decades ago the notion of parenthood was absolutely clear, being based on incontrovertible biological facts, perhaps with the only exception of adoption, which is in any case verifiable objectively. In the new context brought about by ARTs, the concept of parenthood is now extended and not necessarily based on biological facts, so it requires qualifications and distinctions. Hence the need for the word 'parent' to be premodified by means of a classifier to specify the *kind* of parenthood one is making reference to, because the term on its own is not adequate any more.

Actually, the primary definition of *parent* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "A person who is one of the progenitors of child" (OED 2017, *parent* n. and a. 2), where *progenitor* is defined as "A person from whom another is descended" (OED 2017, *progenitor* n.). But the use of this word alone to refer to a couple

having children through surrogacy does not seem appropriate, all the more so as in some cases they have no biological link with the baby, or have only a partial one (the father, or the mother, only): within the superordinate class of *parents, intended parents* – also, *intending parents, future parents, planned parents, prospective parents* – are a specific sub-class characterised by distinctive peculiarities. Incidentally, it can be noted that in any other contexts these expressions could simply refer to couples who intend to have children, but in the context of surrogate motherhood they unequivocally designate commissioning parents. In this framework, it is meaningful that on some of the surrogacy websites a strategy typical of scientific popularization, denomination (cf. Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2004: 372; 374-376),[8] is used to provide an explicit indication as to the real meaning attributed to the classifiers accompanying the word *parents*, as in the following example:

(20)   A couple that wishes to use a surrogate arrangement are referred to as the "Intended Parents." (EXC)

The need to add lexical distinctions is all the more desirable in the case of the lexeme *mother* which occurs 500 times in the corpus. Apart from a few cases where this word has a general meaning (as for instance in *single mother, divorced mother*, etc.), in these texts there is the obvious need to distinguish the commissioning mother from the surrogate mother. So, in 20% of the cases (89), the former is denominated *prospective mother, contracting mother, intended/ing mother, commissioning mother, future mother* and, where she has donated her ovum, *genetic mother*, while in the remaining 411 occurrences of *mother* reference is made to the surrogate mother, who is called *substitute / surrogate mother*, or more rarely (4 times) *birth mother*; in further 617 cases the noun *surrogate/s* alone is used.

Something similar happens with the word *father*, which for obvious reasons is used much less frequently in the corpus, with only 52 occurrences. Exactly like *mother*, also *father* is mostly preceded by a classifier – *intended father, future father, prospective father, biological father, genetic father* – thus confirming the need for new specifications.

Notable developments are also found in the semantic area covered by the word *pregnant*, which was traditionally defined as an adjective meaning "Of a woman or other female mammal: having offspring developing in the uterus.

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8 Calsamiglia and van Dijk (2004) list d*enomination* among the explanatory strategies used in popular science, often in combination with *definition*, to introduce technical notions and make them accessible to the layperson.

(OED 2017, *pregnant*, adj.1 and n.), according to a conceptualization that is obviously based on the natural gestation process. But also in these cases the meaning of the word is extended to refer also to the intended mother, as in the following passage, where this notion is made explicit:

(21) Always remember that pregnancy can cause emotional behavior in women! It is important that you stay calm and immediately contact your counselor to discuss this behavior. *Remember that you are also pregnant and therefore this statement applies to both parties*. (CSP)

Noteworthy is the suggestion that the intended mother may be suffering from the emotional changes that are typical of pregnant women. But given that such changes are due to biochemical alterations in the endocrine system and brain chemistry, this suggestion is physically groundless, and could only have a psychological justification.

In other cases, the meaning of the word is extended further to include not only the prospective mother, but both partners in the couple:

(22) There are many reasons that *couples* seek donated eggs *to become pregnant*. [...] Many intended parents would be willing to accept the monetary risk, if they could reduce their emotional downside – if they could be assured *they would get pregnant* after investing all the time, money and energy an IVF cycle demands. (NLGEO)

The word *pregnant* is often used in this way in the testimonies published on these websites, as in example (23) telling the story of two Hollywood celebrities, Angela Bassett and Courtney Vance:

(23) Eventually, a friend approached Angela and announced that *she and her husband were five months pregnant*. However she did not look pregnant at all. Confused, Angela said, 'You are?' and the friend revealed that they were working with a surrogate mother. (CSP)

Occasionally the meaning of the term is further extended to include the reference to a gay male couple, as in the following example:

(24) At the time of this writing, *Craig and I are just over twenty weeks pregnant* with one child. Thank God, the pregnancy has gone smoothly so far. *Like all expectant parents, we are excited, overjoyed, and a little nervous*. (CSP)

Here obviously the physical state of gravidity pertains to the surrogate mother, but is constructed discursively as being a state of the commissioning couple, although it seems that for a man it may not be easy to identify with such a typically feminine state. Thus the word *pregnant* is deprived of its material component, and its meaning is limited to the situation of expectancy that accompanies pregnancy.

A similar shift in meaning affects other words or expressions within the semantic area of reproduction. For instance, in the rhetorical effort to put commissioning parents at ease, in the *About* section of the CSP's website parenthood is denied as a physical state, and is rather qualified as a state of the mind:

(25)   Your child is conceived because of your desire, hard work, and dedication to becoming parents. *We believe the true genesis of your child* is his or her creation in your minds and hearts. (CSP)

Thus, the physical, biological and genetic process of reproduction is minimized, while the *real* genesis of a child is affirmed to take place in the hearts and minds of the intended parents, being the result of an act of will. Here again recourse is made to dissociation (cf. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969[1958]: 433-471; van Rees 2009: 3-4), *true* being a typical marker of this argumentative device; the concept of "genesis of the child" – i.e. conception and gestation – is deconstructed into a mental / emotional element ("his or her creation in your minds and hearts") that is presented as the only *true* one, and a *physical* element which by presupposition is stated to be 'untrue', against all evidence.

It is also noteworthy that in these examples the use of the verb *to create* (which occurs 100 times in the corpus) is vague enough as to be suitable to describe various forms of collaboration aimed at conception and birth without excluding the intended parents, who are thus represented as agents. The most frequent collocations of *create* are *create a child* (*a baby, pregnancy*), *create an embryo* (more frequently in the passive: *an embryo created...*), *create a family* (*a loving family*, etc.).

This provides evidence of the extensive re-conceptualisation and terminological redefinition triggered by the impact of the new reproductive technologies, which is associated with the reframing of both physical situations and social roles. To generalise this process, it could be said that, while previously the representation of facts connected with reproduction was based on the application of what Goffman calls "natural primary frameworks" as it identified events that are purely physical and "are understood to be due ... to 'natural' determinants" (Goffman 1974: 21-22), the new technologies have caused a shift towards the application of "social primary frameworks" that on the contrary "provide

background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence" and can be described as "guided doings" (Goffman 1974: 22). In other words, a conceptualization based on physical parameters has been supplanted by one based on psychological and social criteria.

5 Conclusions

The analysis of the texts published on ten surrogacy organizations' websites has provided evidence of an approach to communication that represents surrogacy through discursive frames which construct the process, the actors and the moral issues involved in unquestionably positive terms, while disregarding the most problematic and controversial issues. Being faced with the need to counter the allegations made against the practice, surrogacy organizations tend to refrain from tackling certain aspects squarely, among them their commercial character, accusations of baby trading and exploitation of the surrogate mother, the obligation for her to give up maternity rights unconditionally, problems in maternity/paternity recognition, and unlawfulness of the practices in many countries.

For this purpose on the analysed websites discursive frames are activated that divert attention from these controversial aspects and rather focus on all the positive effects of surrogacy, highlighting the values potentially associated with it – altruism, the happiness of parenthood, the joy of helping couples achieve it, and birth and parenthood as absolutely positive values. In this respect, metaphorical frames – e.g. those based on the *journey*, the *dream* and the *gift* metaphors – are especially useful and make it possible for fertility centres to put forth their value proposition and represent surrogacy without mentioning material facts (fees for commissioning parents, surrogate compensation, technical procedures, physical and genetic facts and consequences, legal implications) which would cast a dubious light on the process.

When some of the most controversial elements are actually dealt with, recourse to the rhetorical strategy of dissociation makes it possible to acknowledge the problematic character of surrogacy when practised unethically, while retaining its goodness in all other cases. Even more remarkably, dissociation is used to separate the physical component – conception, gestation, delivery – in the "genesis of a child" from the mental/emotional process that leads intended parents to start the surrogacy process, so that the latter can be presented as the *true* form of parenthood.

Another salient discursive frame appearing on surrogacy websites is that of the right to parenthood as a universal positive human right, which is in itself an essential ideological premise to all other representations put forth on the websites.

A further aspect that has emerged from the analysis is the impact of the introduction of new reproductive technologies and the resultant social changes on linguistic and discursive practices. In particular, this has given rise to a mechanism of lexical innovation and adaptation regarding the description of roles in the reproduction process and the denomination of ensuing kinship relations, in a context where the conceptualisation of family and family relations has been changing rapidly. Words that were previously monoreferantial, like *parent* or *mother,* now need to be qualified in order to account for facts and notions in the semantic area of reproduction which biomedical advances have made more complex and fluid. The shift in the meaning of words like *pregnancy* from reference to a physical state to the designation of a mental and psychological state is especially interesting.

In a more general perspective, these observations show the extent to which language and discourse do not simply reflect reality, but rather construct it by rendering particular accounts of what the real world is like, and imposing on it categorizations that are essentially social in kind.

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